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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT : *Rick Abasta, Press Officer*
Office of the President and Vice President
THE NAVAJO NATION
Phone: 928-871-7925
Fax: 928-871-4025
Email: rickyabasta@navajo-nsn.gov

President Begaye clarifies and stands against U.S. EPA reimbursements

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz—The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is offering immediate reimbursements for damages from the Gold King Mine water contamination in exchange for waiving rights for future claims.

On August 11, the Navajo Nation Office of the President and Vice President received report that EPA representatives were in the Utah communities of Aneth and Oljato to encourage Navajo people to agree to the reimbursements.

Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye said, “The Navajo people need to know that they should not file for reimbursement until the injuries and costs related to the contamination have stopped.”

For individuals who sign the claim, they will not be eligible for claims in the future, if additional injuries or damages arise from the long-term effects of contamination.

On Wednesday, during the 7 a.m. briefing with the executive incident management team, President Begaye said Navajo people must be properly educated on what they are signing, especially the elders.

President Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez will be meeting with U.S. EPA administrator Regina McCarthy on Thursday, who will spend one hour on the Navajo Nation to view the contamination of the water.

“We are also concerned about our neighbors and whether this form is being circulated in their communities. This is not just hurting the Navajo people, but all those in the Four Corners region. Think twice before you sign the form,” Vice President Nez said.

Operation Tó Litso (Yellow Water)

Operation Tó Litso, or Yellow Water, is officially underway.

The Navajo Nation is activating the Emergency Operations Center at the Navajo Transportation Complex in Tse Bonito, N.M. later today. The EOC will be the hub for all calls, dispatch of services and other resources as needed.

There will also be regional Incident Command Posts established in Shiprock, Aneth and Oljato. The Shiprock ICP, located at the chapter house, is already in operation. The other two are set to come online in the next few days.

There will be a follow up meeting by OPVP at Aneth Chapter House on Friday at 10 a.m. and at Oljato Chapter House at 3 p.m.

Vice President Nez said, “Łeezh łitso, or yellow dirt, is the Navajo word for uranium, the cause of another contamination of Navajo water wells and sources decades ago, from which Navajo residents are still suffering repercussions.”

Public Meeting Updates

During the August 10 public information updates in Aneth and Oljato, Navajo citizens voiced their concerns about the water contamination.

This isn’t the first time the government left behind contaminated water sources on the Nation, they said.

Representatives from OPVP, Department of Justice, Navajo EPA, Division of Public Safety and members of the Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Management joined Vice President Nez to provide updates.

Attorney General Ethel Branch said the Upper Animas Mine District is a 140-square mile area north of Durango, Colorado with 300 mines, all of them abandoned after being mined from the late 1800s to 1991.

She said the Navajo Nation will pursue legal action and that it is important for residents affected by the contamination to begin documenting their damages.

U.S. EPA

Two community involvement representatives from EPA Region 9, David Yogie and Secody Hubbard, provided an update on the spill.

“The EPA is taking this very seriously and it’s working to control this, first and foremost,” Yogie said.

He said two EPA contractors have been sampling the water along the San Juan River with representatives from the Navajo EPA Surface Mining Program. Their focus is from Shiprock to Mexican Hat.

Four additional contractors were dispatched to support two teams doing sampling at the river. There are also 12 on-scene coordinators, two public information officers, two

community health coordinators and 21 employees and contractors from Denver responding to the spill.

No Apologies

At the Oljato meeting at the Monument Valley Visitors Center, Dr. Peterson Zah gave some background on the resiliency of the Navajo people, from the Long Walk to the uranium contamination to the disaster of the San Juan River contamination.

“Many years from now, the Navajo people will still be here on our tribal lands,” Zah said in Navajo. “They keep trying to get rid of us, but we’re still here surviving.”

Turning to Yogie, the senior EPA official that reported, Zah said he was no different than all the other Navajo elders in attendance.

“What I was looking for (from the EPA) was an apology. We didn’t even get one. I wanted to hear from the U.S. government that they were sorry,” Zah said. “Maybe you should include that in the first part of your presentation at your next meeting.”